

Robert de Visée and the French tuning

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In our time, it is taken for granted that guitarist Robert de Visée exclusively made use of the so-called ‘French’ tuning, which only has a low octave string (a bourdon) on the fourth course, while both strings on the fifth course are tuned in the high octave: a-a/d’-d/g-g/b-b/e’. In this article we will look into the textual and circumstantial evidence on which this idea is based. A key source is the introduction to Visée’s first guitar book (1682)¹, in which the composer remarks:

‘I beg those who have a good knowledge of composition, and are not familiar with the guitar, not to be scandalized if they find that I sometimes break the rules. It is the instrument that asks for it, and it is necessary to satisfy the ear preferably to all.’²

What exactly would the instrument be asking for? It is sometimes argued that Visée, making use of the French tuning, may have thought of the inconvenient voice crossings of the bass and the other parts – regardless of whether they appear in plucked or in strummed textures. And that he still accepted those anomalies because he thought that the instrument was better strung without a fifth-course bourdon.

His reasons for not using this bourdon would have been the supposedly inferior acoustic qualities of a thick low A string, or the problems with performing *campanelle* as well as with playing ornaments on two strings of unequal gauge.³ However, as a lutenist Visée must have been very familiar with using thicker strings, and in his guitar music *campanelle* only play a subordinate role, while at the same time ornaments and slurs appear frequently on the octave-strung fourth course.

Visée’s text can also be interpreted in another way. As it appears from the tablatures, his music is loaded with strummed harmonies, in many of which the bass is in an unfavourable position. This would place it in the tradition of the *battuto-pizzicato* style of his Italian predecessors who moved to France, such as Foscari, Bartolotti, and Corbetta. Also, in their music there are many *battuto* chords in which the order of the notes and the position of the bass are not in agreement with the rules of counterpoint,

¹ See for Visée’s two guitar books: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b9010055j?rk=21459;2> (1682) and <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b90100455?rk=21459;2> (1686). In the preface to his 1686 book there is no reference to the tuning or stringing.

² ‘je prie ceux qui scavrons bien la composition, et ne connoistreront pas la guitare, de n’estre point scandalizez, s’ils trouvent que je m’escarte quelque fois des regles. C’est l’instrument qui le veut, et il faut satisfaire l’oreille preferablement a tout. . . ’

³ Like Gaspar Sanz argued in his *Instrucción* (1674).

while such voice crossings are virtually absent in plucked sections. At least if we would assume that they used the tuning with two bourdons.⁴ Therefore, ‘those who were familiar with the guitar’ would probably not have considered this as a problem.⁵

Visée’s transcriptions

With regard to his transcriptions Visée explains:

‘As my friends have noticed that the melodies of my pieces have some charm, they have pressed me to transcribe some of these into music notation [*en musique*], for the benefit of those who wish to play them on the harpsichord, the violin, and other instruments. They will find these at the end of the book, comprising the [continuo] bass and the treble.’

And later he remarks:

‘I have been obliged to transpose the pieces *de musique* because of the range of the guitar, which [only] goes as high as *D la-re*.⁶ Don’t forget to put an octave [string] on the fourth course, [as] it is very much needed.’⁷

Even though Visée tells that he had to transpose these pieces when making a transcription for treble and bass – or actually basso continuo, sometimes both versions are still in the same key.⁸ Visée, who was seen as one of the finest continuo players of his generation, probably was well aware that the guitar has a relatively low pitch, comparable to that of the lute, and we should realise that normally guitar music will sound an octave lower than a version notated *en musique*. Hence, probably, his remark about the range of the guitar.

⁴ For a discussion of this topic see my article ‘The guitar in the sixteen-seventies’:

http://www.lexeisenhardt.com/file/The_guitar_in_the_1670s.pdf.

⁵ Compare James Tyler and Paul Sparks, *The Guitar and its Music*, Oxford University Press (2002), p. 40: ‘. . . when the chords are played on a guitar without bourdons, any inversions are virtually inaudible. Even on a Baroque guitar strung *with* bourdons, the effect is still one of nearly inversion-free block harmonies.’ This still applies for battuto chords in music from later times.

⁶ Although we should be careful with drawing conclusions based on solmisation, most likely Visée is referring to the highest note of the guitar (*l’estendüe de la guitare qui va jusques en D la-re en haut*). This is the d'' of the tenth fret.

⁷ ‘*Comme mes amis ont trouvé que le chant de mes pièces avoit quelque agrément, ils m’ont obligé d’en mettre une partie en musique pour la satisfaction de ceux qui voudront les jouer sur le clavecin, le violon, et autres instruments. Ils les trouveront a la fin du livre, scavoir la basse et le dessus. . . J’ay esté obligé de transposer les pièces de musique a cause de l’estendüe de la guitare qui va jusques en D la-re en haut. Il ne faut oublier une octave a la quartrième corde, elle y est tres necessaire.*’

⁸ Compare for example the suite for guitar in D minor (1686, p. 5-16) and its transcription (1686, p. 45-53).

The reason for transposing some of the suites might have been that he strived for more convenient keys (and range) for the violin or other treble instruments, playing the solo part.⁹ While he goes on to state that a fourth-course bourdon should be added, which would lead to the French tuning, it is not at all clear why expanding the range of the guitar would require transposing the ensemble music.

The ensemble version of the guitar suite in B minor (1686, p. 60), for instance, is transposed a whole tone down (to A minor), or actually a minor seventh up. Had the guitar music been in A minor as well, which, however, might have affected the character of the music, the highest notes would have been the *c*'s at the eight fret, which is well within the range (*l'estendue*) of the instrument.

There seems to be no good reason for transposing the ensemble version, other than that A minor is more convenient, for example by having fewer (chromatic) accidentals than B minor. He probably chose to write the guitar suite in the key of B minor because of the darker effect the instrument makes, compared to A minor, as a result of using fewer open strings.

The texture of the guitar suites in question, including many battuto chords, and the way the music is placed on the fingerboard, suits the instrument particularly well. For this reason alone, we may assume that these were the original versions, and that the scores with a treble and bass part were created afterwards. No earlier versions for other instruments are known, and as far as we can tell none of the suites needed to be transposed, in order to fit the range of the guitar.

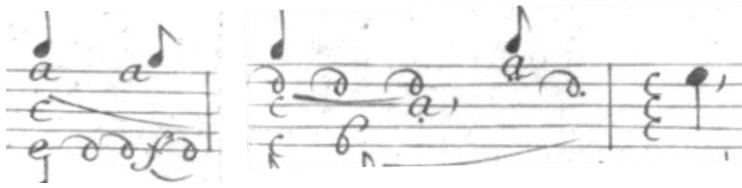
Bourdons and counterpoint

The absence of a fifth-course bourdon can create unfavourable circumstances for voice leading, in particular of the bass. In Ex. 1b, the bass, plucked with the thumb, rises above the middle voice, and therefore it will be impossible to identify the bass line by ear. It would take quite a stretch of imagination to believe that someone like Visée, with a background in lute and theorbo music, would have found this acceptable.

In Ex. 2 we find an inconvenient downward leap in the bass, of a minor seventh, which obscures the line of this voice. When performed on a guitar without a fifth-course bourdon, the first three notes appear to be part of a 'middle voice', while the rest of the notes, starting with the *d* on the fourth course, is clearly intended to sound in the lower octave.¹⁰

⁹ The well-known *Tombeau de Mr. Francisque Corbet* (1682, p. 64), in G minor, even is transposed a fourth down, or actually a fifth up, compared to the guitar version (1682, p. 38), which curiously is in C minor. This is a rather unusual key for some other instruments. For this *Tombeau*, a guitar with eleven frets is required. This is one fret more than the standard range that he mentioned in the preface to this book, which has the *d*' on the tenth fret (*D la-sol-re en haut*) as the highest note.

¹⁰ With a baroque guitar in hand, you can check the effect of these examples, with and without a bourdon on the fifth course.



Ex. 3a. 1682 p. 18, Allemande in D minor, bar 31-32.



Ex. 3b. Id., with French tuning.



Ex. 3c. Id., with a fifth-course bourdon.

In the past decades, the view has gained ground that harmonies in less favourable position should not be seen as a problem at all; because of the very particular acoustic properties of the five-course guitar there would be no need to avoid unsuitable inversions, on the assumption that the mind will fill in the missing information.

The implication of this claim is far-reaching: although the different methods of stringing occasionally lead to uncommon inversion of the counterpoint, the effect would be of limited importance because the ear is still able to distinguish the intentions of the composer. While making use of different tunings will result in different voice leading, this would not fundamentally alter the musical content. As demonstrated with the above examples, this theory does not seem to hold water, and it is doubtful whether it reflects Visée's thinking. And, as there is no way to prove this, we should be aware that we might even be missing the point if we were to perform this kind of contrapuntal music on a guitar without a bourdon on the fifth course.

Chordal accompaniment and stringing

For strummed accompaniment, the baroque guitar had the benefit of having no more than five courses. An added sixth course, tuned in E, would have made it very difficult, or even impossible, to include all the strings in a number of 'open' chords (without full barres) that were often used, such as

G minor, C minor¹¹, D minor, and F major, while on a five-course instrument we can easily play these common chords without concerns about including non-chord tones.

The guitar in re-entrant tuning (i.e., without bourdons on the fourth and fifth courses), widely used in France to accompany popular songs, proved to be very practical; because of the very close position of the pitches of the open strings all chords will sound more or less the same, while issues of voice leading and chord position did not seem to matter. The first source to clearly mention re-entrant tuning is Luis de Briceño's *Metodo muy facilissimo* (1626), published in Paris. Because of the relatively small number of sources, it is impossible to draw final conclusions about how many players used one tuning or the other.¹² However, given the fact that in 1682 Visée found it necessary to recommend adding a bourdon, we must assume that the re-entrant tuning was still being used.

If we add bass strings, new problems can arise with regard to intonation and sound quality. Choosing the right string type (and size) would require a thorough understanding of the implications of using different kinds of strings.¹³ Such knowledge may have been lacking among players who were accustomed to re-entrant stringing. Besides, locally-produced thinner strings probably were more easily accessible, and less expensive than imported thicker strings of high quality.¹⁴

Perhaps the message Visée wanted to convey to those who were using the re-entrant tuning was something like: 'You should at least add a low octave string to the fourth course – even though it may

¹¹ C minor often had an added d'. See the chord table from Corbetta's *Guittarre royalle* (1671): <https://bdh-rd.bne.es/viewer.vm?id=0000125745&page=15>

¹² In Mersenne (1636), *F-Psg Ms. Rés 2344* (c. 1649), and later in *F.Pn.Ms.Rés.1402* and in the books of Antoine Carré (1671), and Nicolas Derosier (1690), re-entrant tuning is implied. In his *Traité des instruments* (c.1640) Pierre Trichet, however, described the tuning with two bourdons.

¹³ See Lynda Sayce, 'An introduction to gut strings on the lute' p. 2: 'Bass strings. Here we have a lot of choices. On a few instruments such as the 6 course lute, Venice strings will work well right down to the bass, producing a focused sound with longer sustain than other plain gut strings. If we need lower notes on a relatively short string length, we will need heavier strings, and here we meet the big problem of stringing a lute in gut. We want bass courses with a strong focused sound, but we cannot merely keep increasing the thickness of the strings to achieve lower notes. A very thick plain gut string sounds dull, is too inflexible to fret in tune, feels cumbersome under the fingers, and would not fit through the bridge and peg holes of historical lutes.'

For Sayce's discussion of the use of different types of strings visit:

<http://www.theorbo.com/publications/assets/An%20introduction%20to%20gut%20strings%20on%20the%20lute.pdf#page=2>.

We should bear in mind, however, that the guitar in conventional tuning usually had high octave strings on the fourth and fifth courses as well, enhancing the overtones of the (relatively thin) bourdons.

¹⁴ See Djilda Abbott and Ephraim Segerman, 'Strings in the 16th and 17th Centuries,' *The Galpin Society Journal* Vol. 27 (1974), p. 52: '... since guitars were probably strummed in the middle of the string... we are not surprised that they did not adopt the full range of lutes and viols. Other factors limiting their ranges might have been that their players, being less aristocratic, might have preferred the economy and reliability of supply of locally-produced strings rather than being dependent on expensive imported ones. This would not only limit their range on the bass side by excluding highly-twisted delicate strings, but also on the treble side where imported strings (such as Minikins) had superior tensile strength.'

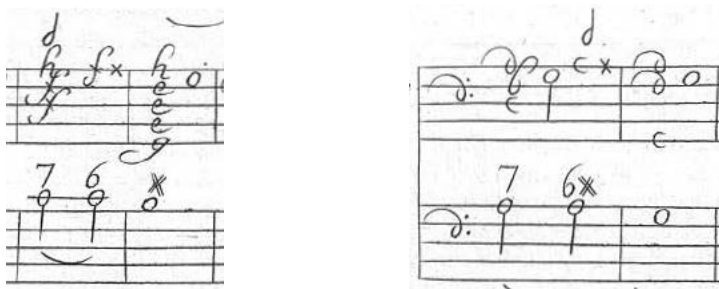
For this same reason, re-entrantly strung guitars apparently were often tuned a whole tone lower. See the tuning charts for re-entrant tuning in *F.Pn.Ms.Rés.1402*; *F:Psg Ms.Res.2344*; Mersenne (1636), and Carré (1671).

be more expensive than the kind of strings you are used to. Without this bourdon my music makes no sense.'

Basso continuo

About a decade earlier, Francesco Corbetta had made a similar remark about stringing, saying: 'I advise you to add an octave d to the fourth course, because the two unisons do not make harmony.' Nevertheless, the basso continuo examples from p. 100 and 101 from his *Guitarre royalle* (1671) show that only with a fifth-course bourdon the bass of the pizzicato chords will usually be the lowest note, whereas when played battuto the chords (mostly standard alfabeto) are treated as inversion-free harmonies.¹⁵ While the position of these battuto chords is ambiguous, they were nonetheless often understood as being in root position, like it is indicated by the bass notes in staff notation.¹⁶ This still applies to the continuo examples by Grenerin (1680)¹⁷ and Matteis (1682).¹⁸ It is not known whether Visée ever used the guitar for basso continuo, but by comparing the figured bass from his ensemble arrangements to the guitar tablatures we can gain a better understanding of his musical principles with regard to voice leading.

Even if the final chords from Ex. 4 should be strummed, the suspended notes (such as 4-3 or 7-6, indicated by the figures at the basso continuo staff) will resolve audibly, in the same octave. Also the line of the top voice usually makes perfect sense. Only the position of the lowest sounding note of the battuto chord to which the plucked harmonies resolve often differs from the bass in the continuo staff.



Ex. 4a. Two cadences from (1671) p. 101.

¹⁵ See note 5, above.

¹⁶ See <https://bdh-rd.bne.es/viewer.vm?id=0000125745&page=120>.

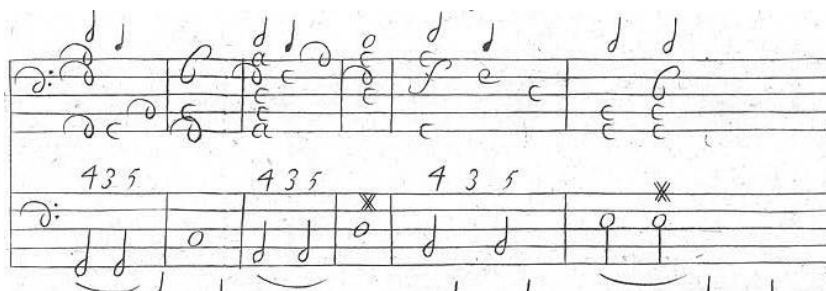
¹⁷ Henry Grenerin, *Livre de guitarrre*, Paris 1680.

¹⁸ Nicola Matteis, *The false consonances of music*, n.p., c. 1682.

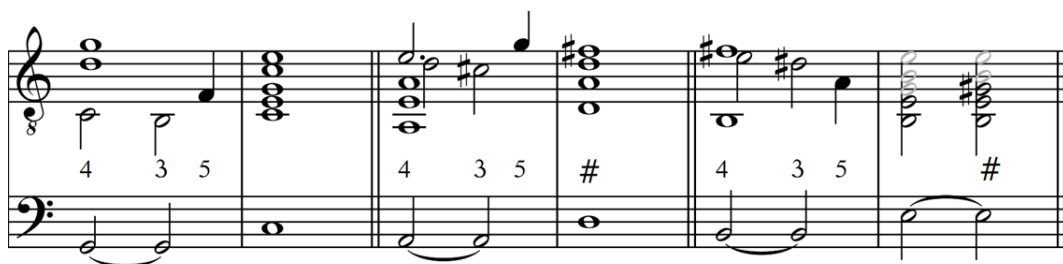


Ex. 4b. Id., transcriptions.

The first cadence of ex. 5. may be the rare exception that proves the rule. While in almost all other examples from page 100 and page 101 the bass indicated in staff notation will be the lowest sounding note, here the root of the chord is the g' on the first course. We could even compare it to ex. 6 in which the plucked note g on the third course will sound below the b \flat if we would only pluck the high octave string of the fifth course (if a bourdon would be present). A similar solution would be feasible with Ex. 5, if we would include the open g of the third course (not indicated in the tablature) in the plucked first chord.¹⁹



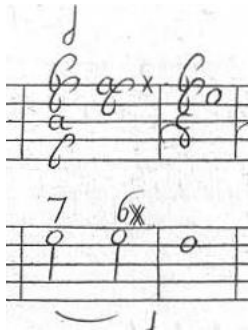
Ex. 5a. p. 100



Ex 5b. Id., transcription.²⁰

¹⁹ Another explanation could be that the first harmony from ex. 5b, like the one in the next cadence on this same line, actually would have had to be a strummed five-part chord, and that the note value erroneously has been placed above the staff instead of in the staff. This may as well apply to the resolution of the third cadence on the same line, which probably would have to be strummed. Five-part chords were never plucked by Corbetta.

²⁰ As can be seen in Ex. 5a, the figures at the bass are 4/3/5. This should probably be 4/3/7.



Ex. 6a. P. 101.



Ex. 6b. Id, transcription.

The vast majority of Corbetta's cadences have the bass and the dissonances, represented by the figures in the basso continuo part, in the correct position, at least if we would make use of conventional stringing with a bourdon on the fifth course, and not with French tuning.²¹

Overwound strings

In the introduction to his second guitar manuscript²² Jean-Baptiste de Castillion (1680 – 1753), a younger contemporary of Visée, gives insight into the situation of that time, implying that overwound strings had recently come into use, and, as Castillion suggests, that they were not always entirely satisfactory:

'About the strings. . . there are even players, whom I copy, who also put an octave on the fifth course; they call it a bourdon. . . . So as to give the instrument more volume, I cover the octave strings which I use for the fourth and fifth courses with wire of brass or silver; the last is the better of the two. To prevent them from slipping when being tuned to the pitch of the appropriate octave, I only half cover them; that is, the wire is wound in such a way that

²¹ Although one might wish to assume that Corbetta used a second guitar for accompaniment, strung with two bourdons, there is no evidence to support this. While Gaspar Sanz in his *Instrucción* (1674) recommends using a guitar with two bourdons for accompaniment it should be remembered that, unlike Corbetta, Sanz presumably used re-entrant tuning for his solo works. That tuning is definitely unsuitable for playing basso continuo, both in Sanz's punteado (pizzicato) style, or in Corbetta's mixed battuto-pizzicato style.

²² Jean-Baptiste de Castillion *B.Bc.Ms.S5615, Recueil des pieces de guitarre* (1730).

between each twist the length of uncovered string is of the same width as the wire, or slightly greater. I choose thinner strings and I prepare them myself because those which one finds in the shops are entirely covered, or too thick, which makes them sound dry and hard.²³

Half-wound strings were used because they produce a louder tone. The need for a more prominent bass may have increased in the latter part of the 17th century, and experimenting with the newly-developed overwound basses probably played a role in this. Castillion, however, fails to mention that bourdons made of gut had been used for more than a century.

It is not for nothing that on plucked instruments often relatively thin bass strings were used, with slightly lower tensions. Though thinner strings are more flexible and having better acoustical qualities, they still may sound different from the higher courses, and are having not too much volume either. However, if they are accompanied by a high octave string, the blending of the overtones will result in a louder and clearer tone. Different from the tradition of the lute, on which instrument after c. 1600 octave strings were used primarily on the unfretted basses, the high octaves on the fifth and fourth courses continued to be used on the guitar.

In Castillion's manuscripts from 1706 and 1730 – so, compiled when Visée (c. 1660 – c. 1733) was still alive – we find many works by this composer. We may assume that Castillion performed Visée's music on a guitar strung with two bourdons, during the lifetime of the composer.

A reference to Visée's stringing

There are very few eyewitness reports of Visée's performances, providing first-hand information on how he strung his guitar, and what they say should be treated with caution. In Denis Diderot's *Encyclopedie*²⁴, for example, we find a lemma about the guitar which was written by one of the 'Five persons who wish to remain unknown, [who] have provided us with [the next articles]: the first [person] the article GUITTARE; the second [person] the article GAJETÉ; [etc.]'.²⁵

²³ *'Des Chordes - Même il se trouve des amateurs, que j'imite, qui mettent pareillement une octave à la cinquieme corde, ils la nomment bourdon....Et afin de donner à ce instrument plus de son, je charge les deux octaves que je mets au quatrieme et cinquieme rang d'un fin filet de laiton ou d'argent, ce dernier en vaut mieux. Et pour prevenir qu'elles ne sautent en les montant au ton d'octave nécessaire, je ne les charge qu'à demi : C'est à dire qu'il reste un espace viude à la corde, de la grosseur du dit filet ou même un peu plus, et je choisis des cordes d'un moindre grosseur. Je les prepare moi-même, à cause que celles qu'on trouve aux boutiques sont entierement chargées ou trop grosses, ce qui rend le son sec et dure.'* Translation by Monica Hall, <https://monicahall2.files.wordpress.com/2012/03/stringing2012.pdf#page=57>.

²⁴ Denis Diderot, *Encyclopedie* Vol. 7, p. 1011 (1757).

²⁵ Thanks to Gérard Rebours for pointing at this information. Denis Diderot, *Encyclopedie* (1757) Vol. 7, p. xiv: 'Cinq personnes qui ne veulent pas être connues, nous ont donné, la première l'article GUITTARE; la seconde l'article GAJETÉ; [etc.]'.

We cannot possibly know where this anonymous writer got his information from, and whether he ever heard Visée play, or that he was just referring to the text from Visée's 1682 book, when stating that: 'Visée, famous guitar master under Louis XIV, did not put an octave [string] at the fifth course, and thus he lost the [low] A, and by that half an octave.'²⁶ The text was published twenty years after the death of the composer, and almost seventy years after the publication of Visée's last guitar book (1686). On p. 1013 (vol. 7) of the *Encyclopedie* we find a diagram of the neck of the guitar, in which the two bourdons are clearly visible.



Ex. 7. Diderot, *Encyclopedie* Vol. 7, p. 1013.

A transition

With regard to stringing, the situation in France was fluid. In the second half of the seventeenth century there still existed a firm tradition of re-entrant stringing, while at the same time there was a growing influence of great Italian virtuosi, some of whom made use of the conventional tuning with two bourdons. Based on the information from the available pre-1671 French sources we can assume that, also in France, two different tunings were used, one with bourdons and one without.

For a short period, probably starting around 1670, some guitarists had begun to make use of the so-called French tuning, by adding a bourdon to the fourth course. We can consider this as an intermediate stage, which probably was the result of a clash of traditions. Because of the dynamics of this transition, which would eventually lead to the widespread use of the conventional tuning with two bourdons, it is not possible to know beyond doubt whether one particular guitarist, at some point, adapted his stringing by adding a bourdon to the fourth course, and whether or not he changed it again after that.

²⁶ 'Visé, célèbre maître de guitare sous Louis XIV n'en mettoit point l'octave au cinquieme rang; mais il y perdoit l'octave du la, & par conséquent une demi octave.'

For some leading players with experience with the lute and basso continuo on the theorbo, such as Bartolotti, Grenerin, and Visée, considerations of music theory may have affected their writing for the guitar with regard to chord position and counterpoint, for which, as we have seen, a fifth-course bourdon may have been indispensable.

Amsterdam, 2023

Visée's suite in G minor, performed on a guitar with two bourdons:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xFYLW8Pucds&ab_channel=secondolibro

This is the last of four articles dedicated to different aspects of baroque guitar stringing:

['A String of Confusion'](#) (2016),

['Campanelle in Seventeenth-Century Guitar Music, Bells and Riddles'](#) (2018),

['The Guitar in the Sixteen-Seventies'](#) (version 2021)

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